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ABSTRACT

The post-training needs of school counselors employed in urban settings were investigated in this study. A questionnaire was completed by a total of 275 school counselors from 9 urban school districts in Ohio. The top four post-training needs reported by the school counselors were the desire for training in counseling students who: (1) consistently earn failing grades; (2) refuse to take responsibility for their actions; (3) have poor self esteem; and (4) have a problem getting along with others. Counselors also would like to understand the circumstances and needs of the students and their families. Several recommendations are given for school counselors in urban settings. These include: (1) training counselors to understand the interplay of race, culture, poverty, and discrimination with academic learning and motivation; (2) training in skills that focus on working with severe problematic behaviors and attitudes; and (3) training in the referral, consulting, coordination, and collaborating processes to extend the availability of services to students and families. Urban school counselors need role models, mentors, and supervisors who know how to identify and utilize the resources that can be found in their communities. (JDM)

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Post Training Needs of Urban School Counselors

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Post Training Needs of Urban School Counselors

Abstract

The post training needs of school counselors employed in urban settings were investigated. A total of 275 urban school counselors from nine urban school districts in Ohio responded to a 75-item questionnaire. The top four post training needs reported by the urban school counselors were the desire for training in "counseling students who consistently earn failing grades," "counseling students who refuse to take responsibility for their actions," "counseling students with poor self esteem," and "counseling students who have problems getting along with others." Recommendations are provided for preparing school counselors to work in urban settings which include the necessity for these professionals to understand the unique circumstances and needs of students and families.

Urban educators face tremendous challenges in their work to help students achieve educational, social, personal, and career goals. A few of the hurdles many urban students confront as they strive to survive the malaise of their circumstances are chronic underachievement, language barriers, school absenteeism, poverty, racism, discrimination, violence, drug and alcohol use, and teenage pregnancy. Fortunately, the challenges faced by urban students are matched by the fierce determination of many educators to rejuvenate the quality and delivery of educational programs and services to students and their families. The philosophical nucleus of these efforts is that urban communities are rich in human resources, and with the collaboration of educators, parents, business leaders, community leaders, and concerned others, the quality of life for students and families can significantly improve. Families who remain in our nation's cities and those who are committed to serving their needs, are no longer silently accepting the unspoken premise that urban families are the undesirable and rejected persons left behind by their suburban neighbors. They are pulling up their shirt sleeves, attacking the severity of their problems, and embracing the feeling of rejuvenation that comes with living, working, and playing in communities that are rich in cultural diversity.

In her discussion on inner city education, Wang (1997) reflects this spirit of rejuvenation: " . . .If only we can find the means to magnify the positives in the lives of urban children we can rekindle hope for remaking urban education into a system that fosters resilience and educational success in inner city communities" (p. 255). Keith (1996) builds on this theme of resilience in her discussion on full-service educational institutions, community development, and diversity: " . . .even the poorest urban neighborhoods have knowledge, capacities, and interests and not only deficits and needs. Such knowledge and capacities can and should be part of the foundations on which we build programs and organizations" (p. 255).

With focusing on the positives of urban communities as the goal, educators have proposed and initiated many educational reforms throughout our nation's cities. Some of these reforms include site-based management where teachers have more power to determine the on-going operations of their schools, increased technology for use in the classroom, increased professional development opportunities for educators, and full-service schools. In full-service models, the school is used as the central location for children and families to receive a variety of educational and human services. One of the major services provided in full-service schools is mental health

counseling. Community counselors come to the schools and treat the crisis needs of students and families, and implement activities to counteract the development of at-risk behaviors such as truancy, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

Issues in urban school counseling which include the role of developmentally based guidance programs, and the professional development needs of school counselors, has received minimal attention in the professional counseling literature. In addition, a clear and concise role for urban school counselors, is not currently addressed in the literature on urban education renewal. Approximately nineteen years ago, Avis (1982) alerted the educational community to problems in providing school counseling services in urban secondary schools. She argued that the traditional problems of school counseling (e.g., role confusion, high student-counselor ratios, and non-job-related tasks) are intensified where economic, political, and social problems are severe. A few of her recommendations included the need for urban school counselors to lead the way in defining their role to other professionals in the schools. She challenged urban school counselors to close the gap between the work of the "ideal" school counselor and the work of the "actual" school counselor. Avis further called for urban school counselors to work collaboratively with mental health counseling professionals to address the concerns of students. Finally, she stressed the need for urban school counselors to gain inservice training to re-tool their counseling skills and to learn new counseling approaches.

Clark (1987) also called for urban school counselors to receive inservice training. He emphasized the importance of urban school counselors becoming more directly involved in the instructional program of the school, and more actively involved in assessing and influencing the academic progress of students. Clark believed urban school counselors should implement K-12 guidance programs which focus on meeting the crisis and remedial needs of students (e.g., substance abuse, physical and mental abuse, and teenage pregnancy) as well as programs that focus on meeting the developmental needs of students (e.g., academic advising, career counseling, and stress management).

Although Keys & Bemak (1997) do not specifically address urban school counseling, their discussion on creating school, home, and community linkages is vital for urban school counselors, particularly for those who work in full-service school models. School counselors and community counselors are usually expected to work together in full-service school models. Keys & Bemak recommended school counselors expand their scope and purpose to include collaborating with community mental health providers, court systems, religious organizations and other entities to

serve the multidimensional needs of students and families. Other recommendations included that school counselors should clearly define their role to other school professionals, they should develop skills in working with culturally diverse populations, and they should learn new and effective counseling techniques and strategies.

Holcomb-McCoy (1998) addressed the role of counselor education in providing additional training for urban school counselors. Citing poverty, cultural diversity, minimal resources, violence, and family issues as special challenges for urban educators, Holcomb-McCoy called for training beyond the standards established by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (1994). Included in extended training should be the development of leadership skills wherein school counselors learn how to form linkages with the various community organizations, the development of family intervention and counseling skills, and the development of career counseling strategies which target the unique characteristics of urban students.

A recurrent theme in the sparse literature on urban school counseling is the recommendation that school counselors receive post training opportunities. In order to become a vital resource in the various initiatives in educational reform, urban school counselors must be knowledgeable, skillful, and successful in meeting the needs of students and families. To achieve these goals, they must take as many opportunities as possible to seek relevant post training. The purpose of this study was to investigate the post training needs of urban school counselors.

Method

District officials from nine urban school districts in Ohio were contacted to gain permission for a questionnaire to be distributed to the school counselors in their district. Eight of the district officials mailed the names and school addresses of the school counselors employed in their district. One guidance supervisor volunteered to handle the distribution of the cover letters and questionnaires to the school counselors in the ninth school district. An urban school district is defined as those districts with a student enrollment of 5,000 or more, and whose districts have at least 5% of the children on Aid to Dependent Children (Ohio Department of Education, 1997).

Cover letters and questionnaires were prepared for 472 school counselors. Of the 472 school counselors, 408 were mailed cover letters and questionnaires. The guidance supervisor of the ninth district distributed cover letters and questionnaires to 64 school counselors. The data collection process was conducted in spring, 1996.

The first mailing yielded 186 (46%) questionnaires. An additional 28 (7%) school counselors responded to a second mailing. Of the 64 school counselors who received a cover letter

and questionnaire from their supervisor, 61 were completed and returned. There were a total of 275 usable surveys, resulting in a total final response rate of 58%.

The participants in the study included 64 elementary counselors, 57 middle school counselors, 20 junior high counselors, and 119 high school counselors. Six school counselors identified their setting as "other," indicating they either worked in alternative schools for at risk students, or they worked in a magnet school such as one for the performing arts. Nine school counselors described other employment combinations such as providing counseling services for elementary, middle, and junior high students. These two groups (N = 15) were combined and recorded as "other" for purposes of data analysis. The number of years the participants served as school counselors ranged from 2 months to 35 years (M = 12.4, SD = 8.1). The enrollment data of the school districts indicated that student populations ranged from 9,816, to 74, 026. All the school districts served diverse student populations, ranging from school districts, which serve a minority population of approximately 24%, to districts reporting a minority population of approximately 80%. To provide extended counseling services to students, six school districts contracted out to agencies, which provide mental health services. One school district initiated referrals to mental health agencies to provide additional counseling services for students. No information on use of mental health agency services was available for two school districts.

Questionnaire

A four-part 75-item questionnaire was developed for the purposes of this study. The items for the questionnaire were derived from a review of the literature on issues and trends in school counseling, as well as issues in urban education. The survey was piloted by five practicing school counselors and one internship student in school counseling. The participants of the pilot study provided feedback on the appropriateness of the post training topics, and on the clarity of instructions and questionnaire items. Participants of the pilot study were also asked to verify the researcher's accuracy in distinguishing post training topics that are primarily related to activities associated with developmental guidance and counseling programming and post training topics that are based on meeting the crisis and remedial needs of students. The final version of the questionnaire included the recommendations learned from the pilot study.

Part I of the survey described post training needs which focused on gaining knowledge and skills in consulting, coordinating, designing and administering guidance programs and services. The items were evenly balanced between topics that focused essentially on comprehensive developmental guidance programming, and topics that focused on meeting the crisis and remedial

needs of students. Instructions for Part I were: "Based upon the needs of the students, teachers, and school personnel you serve, rate the importance of the following topics using the scale below." Part II of the questionnaire consisted of post training topics, which focused on developing counseling skills for a variety of student and family problems. Instructions for Part II were: "Based upon the needs of the students you serve, rate the importance of the following topics using the scale below." Part III of the questionnaire described post training topics in the area of legal and ethical considerations, as well as other professional responsibilities. Instructions for Part III were as follows: "Based upon your job responsibilities rate the importance of each topic using the following scale." The participants used a six point likert -type scale to rate their responses to Parts I, II, and III. Part IV of the questionnaire requested participants to identify other post training needs.

Data Analysis

An average rating was computed to determine overall importance level for each questionnaire item. The sorted means were ranked from highest (most important post training need) to least important post training need. A separate analysis was completed to determine if the school counselors considered the developmental guidance and counseling topics more important for post training, or if they identified the crisis and remedial topics as more essential for post training. Two composite scores (one for the developmental guidance and counseling topics, and one for the crisis and remedial topics) were computed based on the average responses of the related questions. A paired T- test was used to compare average responses for the developmental guidance and counseling topics, and the crisis and remedial questionnaire items, in order to distinguish which post training topics represented the greatest needs for urban school counselors.

Results

Table 1 presents the most significant (top 33%) post training needs of all urban school counselors by sorted means of importance in descending order. Most of the training needs were those topics which focused on developing specific counseling skills to work with students who had serious academic, behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal problems. "Providing counseling services for students who consistently earn failing grades" was the most significant training need. The next three most important training needs were, "counseling students who refuse to take responsibility for their actions," "counseling students with poor self esteem." and "counseling students who have problems getting along with others." Other training needs for serious behaviors

were, "counseling students who are consistently absent from school," "counseling students who consistently fight with others," "counseling students who refuse teachers' requests," "counseling students who lack self-control," "counseling discouraged students who try but consistently earn failing grades," and "counseling students who verbally abuse others."

The urban school counselors reported that training in meeting the crisis and remedial needs of students was more important than training related to developmental guidance and counseling programming, t (274) = 15.5, p <.0001. This finding was true when the data was examined by employment setting (urban elementary school counselors, t (62) = 9.76, p < .0001), urban middle school counselors, t (56) = 6.0, p < .0001; urban junior high counselors, t (19) = 6.6, p <.0001; urban high school counselors, t (118), = 8.77, p < .0001), except for the urban school counselors in the "other" category where there was no significance between the two areas of topics. Specific crisis counseling training needs were, "counseling students on grief and loss", "counseling students experiencing domestic violence," "counseling students who have attempted suicide," and "counseling students on their unique needs related to living in urban areas."

The urban school counselors identified several training needs from Part I of the questionnaire which focused on training in consulting, coordinating guidance activities, and program development and administration. The most significant training needs were, "learning how to coordinate violence prevention programs," "learning how to consult with teachers on working with students with severe discipline problems," "learning how to coordinate school guidance activities to prevent student participation in gangs," " learning how to implement guidance activities on character building," " learning how to increase parental involvement," "learning approaches to resolve incidents of racial conflict," and "learning how to develop guidance activities on study habits and test taking skills."

The urban school counselors identified two significant needs from Part III of the questionnaire which focused on training in legal and ethical issues and other professional responsibilities: "Liability issues in the performance of job responsibilities," and "information on legal and ethical issues related to counseling and confidentiality."

A total of 29 urban school counselors responded to Part IV of the questionnaire, which requested information on additional training needs. Of the 29 responses, 20 urban school counselors requested training in how to help administrators understand their role as school counselors. Within these comments, statements were made about being overwhelmed in executing their job responsibilities, which included many non-job related tasks, and comments were made

regarding the need to have a more clearly defined job description (in writing) as agreed upon between counselor and administrators. Other topics included the desire to have more opportunities to interact with other counselors, more training in counseling theories, more information about foster care, and help with proficiency testing.

Discussion

The urban school counselors in this study expressed the desire for post training to address very serious issues related to student academic progress, student misbehavior, and student distress. Generalization of the results of this study to other urban school districts should be considered with caution. There was an acceptable, but modest response rate of 58%. Only those urban school counselors who cared to respond were represented in the sample. However, it is worthy to consider that based upon these findings, school counselors could very well graduate from accredited school counseling programs, and still be unprepared to meet the challenges of working in urban schools. What are the unique needs of students and families who live in urban stressed areas? That is the first question that needs to be answered for school counselors who work, or are interested in working with urban students and families. Other recommendations for future considerations in the preparation of school counselors for employment in urban schools include:

1. Training in understanding the interplay of race, culture, poverty, discrimination and stigmatization with academic learning and motivation.
2. Training in understanding childhood and adolescent disruptive disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder).
3. Training in counseling skills which focus on working with severe problematic behaviors and attitudes.
4. Training in crisis counseling and intervention skills.
5. Training in strategies to increase parental involvement in the schools.
6. Training in special legal and ethical issues as it relates to urban school counseling.
7. Training in guidance programming that reflects the crisis and remedial needs of students.
8. Training in referral, consulting, coordinating, and collaborating processes to extend the availability of services to students and families.
9. Training in working with culturally diverse populations which include discussions on how to counteract the sources of racial conflict and how to work with faculty, students, parents, and administrators to intervene appropriately.
10. Training in leadership behavior which includes learning various forms of verbal and nonverbal communication to clearly articulate and illustrate the role and importance of school guidance programs.

Finally, urban school counselors need role models, mentors, and supervisors who know how to identify and utilize the rich resources that can be found in urban communities. These resources

are often hidden (or ignored) by the local media. These resources and people can be found in urban churches, hospitals, service organizations, and grass roots organizations. Urban school counselors need training in how to find these caring individuals who provide safety nets for students and families, and make them part of their advisory boards and advocacy efforts for fully funded and supported guidance programs.

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Table 1

Post Training Needs of School Counselors	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Counseling for students who consistently earn failing grades	273	1.6	0.7
Counseling for students who refuse to take responsibility for their actions	269	1.7	0.8
Counseling for students with poor self esteem	270	1.7	0.8
Counseling for students who have problems getting along with others	271	1.7	0.7
Coordinating violence prevention programs	273	1.7	0.8
Counseling for students of grief and loss	270	1.8	0.8
Counseling on consistent truants	270	1.8	0.8
Counseling for students exposed to domestic violence	270	1.8	0.8
Counseling for students who consistently fight with others	270	1.8	0.9
Counseling for students who defy teachers' requests	272	1.8	0.9
Counseling for students who lack self control	271	1.8	0.8
Counseling for discouraged students who earn failing grades	270	1.8	0.8
Consulting teachers about severe discipline problems	273	1.8	0.9
Coordinating activities to prevent gang participation	273	1.8	0.8
Coordinating programs on character education	274	1.8	0.8
Liability issues in performance of job	270	1.9	0.9
Confidentiality issues	270	1.9	1
Counseling for students who attempt suicide	265	1.9	0.9
Counseling for verbally abusive students	270	1.9	0.9

Information on urban stress	268	1.9	0.9
Increasing parental involvement	273	1.9	0.8
Resolving racial conflict	271	1.9	0.8
Coordinating drop out prevention programs	255	1.9	0.9
Coordinating activities on study habits and test taking skills	275	1.9	0.8